

WOMP!



I can't believe you won that one!

Ayo's gonna be the strongest and the fastest, Julie.

I knew she'd get me out of the woods first-- and look, totally unscathed!

Oh no!

I skinned my elbow on a branch or something!

Oh man!

You *so* got scathed, Bean.

Wow! What a coupla *nerds*.

I coulda won that stupid race anyway

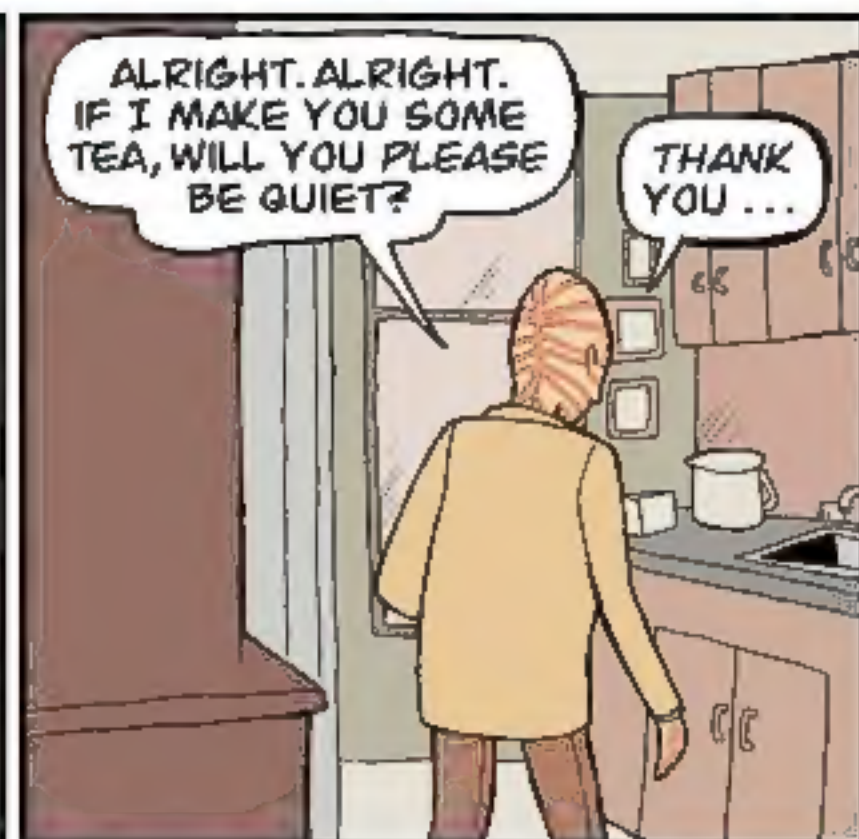


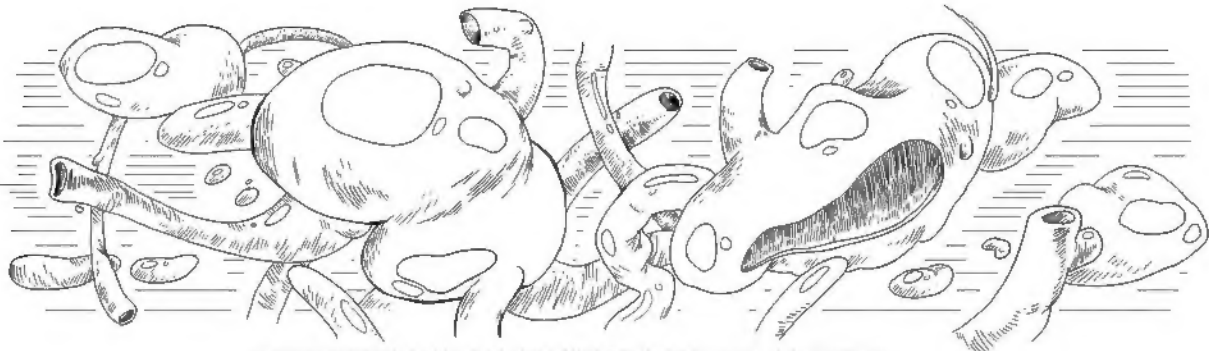


Dr. Wanda Lulenski was an esteemed biologist before she joined SHELL. She thought that studying the strange new life forms created there would be an excellent career choice, but her work seems to require a lot more morally questionable actions than she expected. Lulenski feels trapped in her new line of work, but is also genuinely fascinated by it, which is a side of herself that scares her.

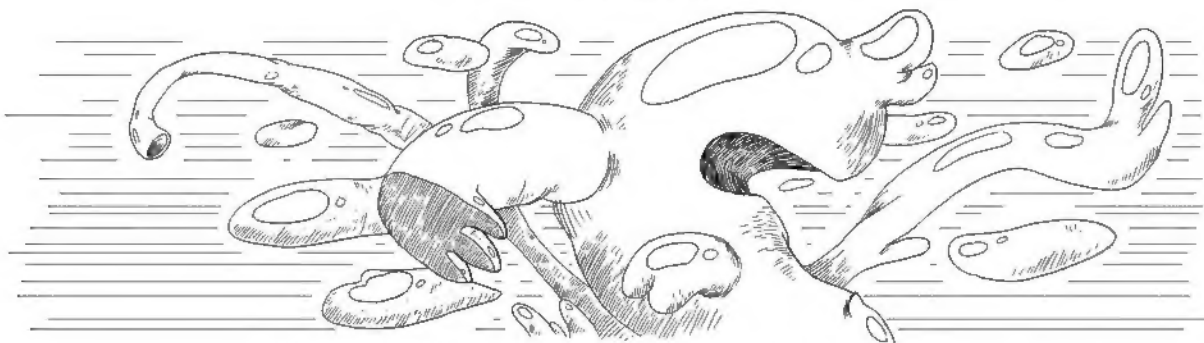
Michael Rjinder is the lead scientist at SHELL. His skin has been transformed into a monster which he must "wear" at all times, but whose tendrils may detach from him temporarily. He is cold, calculating, and morally detached about the work he does. However, he also seems to have a very difficult life, and is quite lonely, especially since his coworkers seem to fear him.



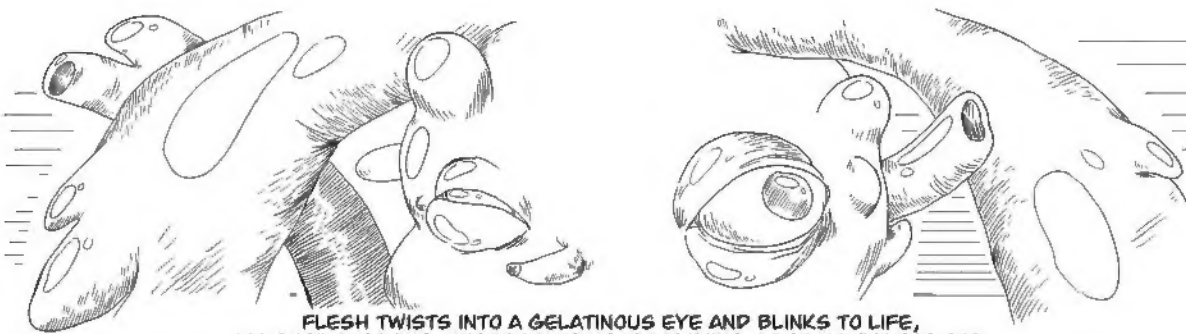




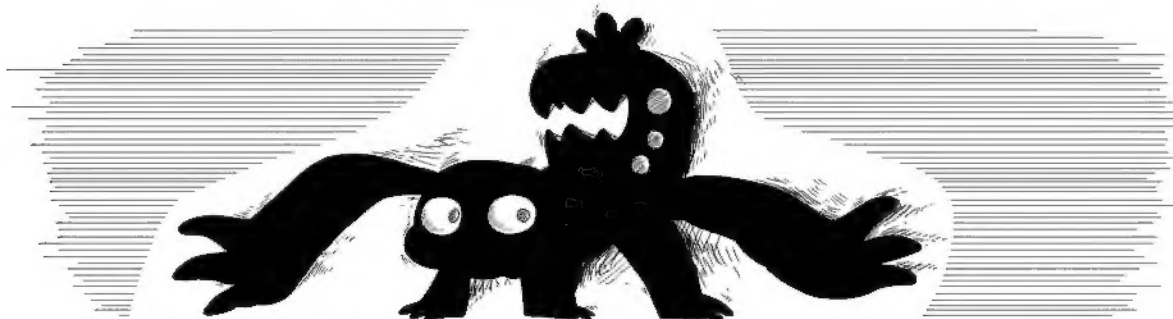
SOME INVISIBLE HAND IS SHAPING THE STOMACH, AS THOUGH IT WERE A LUMP OF CLAY.



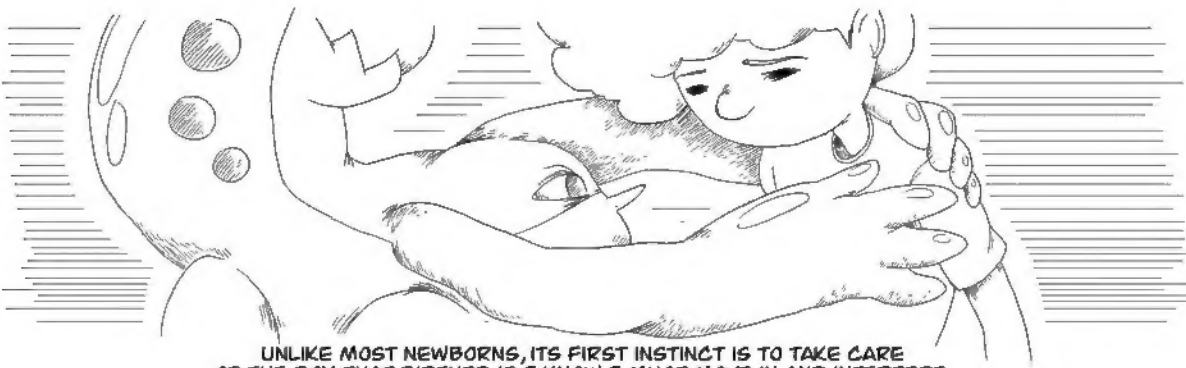
CONFORMING TO A CHILDLIKE SENSE OF LOGIC- A FOOT IS SHAPED FROM STOMACH WALLS, AND COMMENCES TO BEHAVE AS A FOOT, WITHOUT APPARENT ASSISTANCE FROM BONE OR MUSCLE



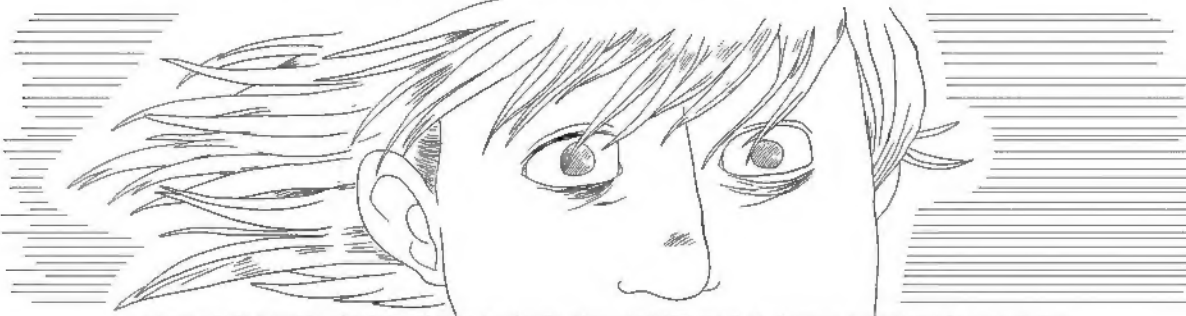
FLESH TWISTS INTO A GELATINOUS EYE AND BLINKS TO LIFE, ITS PUPILS MOVING, UNDERSTANDING, BETRAYING SOME NEWLY FORMED GASTRIC BRAIN IN ITS STILL-SOLIDIFYING HEAD



A WARM WET SMELL OF SALT AND METAL. AN EDGE OF BURNT SWEETNESS. IT RESOLVES ITSELF WITH THE SOUND OF BUBBLES BURSTING AND DOUGHY FLESH SETTLING. IT BRINGS TO MIND A MEMORY OF BEING IN A KITCHEN WHILE SOMETHING IS BEING PULLED FROM THE OVEN.



UNLIKE MOST NEWBORNS, ITS FIRST INSTINCT IS TO TAKE CARE OF THE BOY THAT BIRTHED IT. I KNOW I MUST MOVE IN AND INTERFERE, BUT INSTEAD I STAND AND WATCH THE STRANGE SYMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIP THAT HAS BEGUN TO FORM.



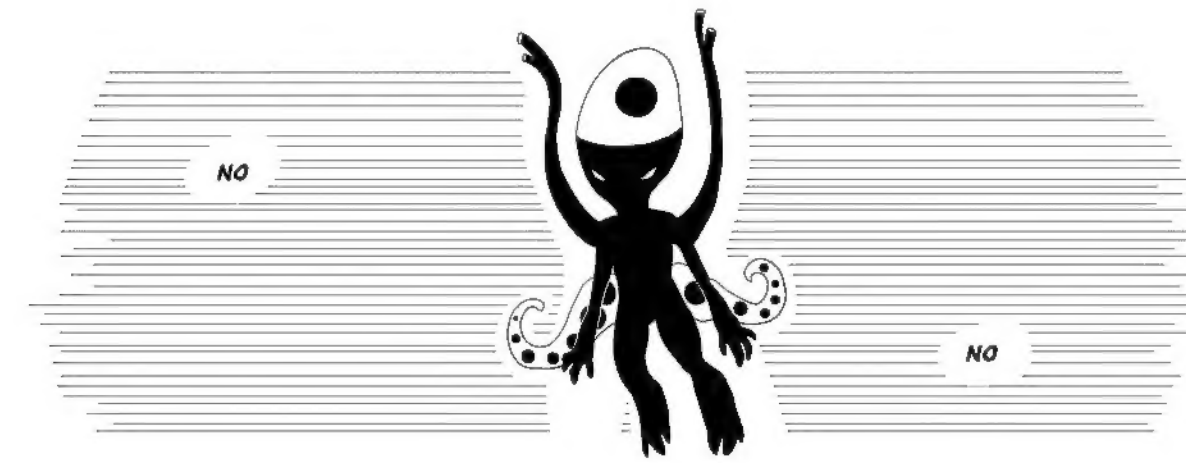
WHAT BIOLOGICAL GEARS MAKE IT MOVE AND THINK? HAS IT BONES AND NERVES DERIVED FROM STOMACH TISSUE? OR IS IT MERELY A FLESHY PUPPET, ANIMATED BY THE FORMLESS GHOST IT ONCE WAS?



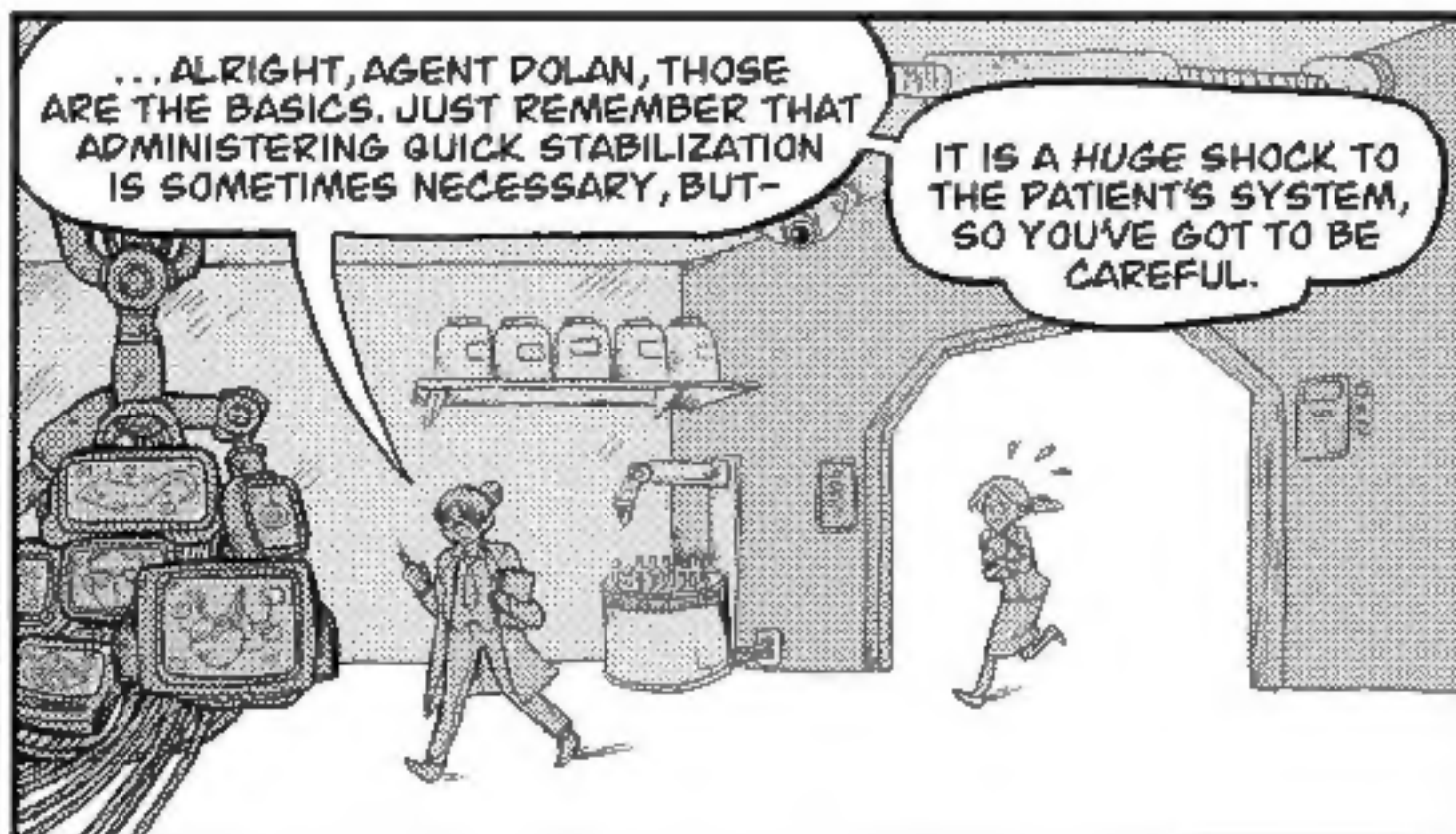
WAIT... SOMETHING'S WRONG. SOMETHING'S DIFFERENT. THIS ISN'T HOW IT WAS.



IS THERE SOMETHING ... BEHIND ME?













OH! DR. LULENSKI!
JUST THE WOMAN
I WANTED TO SEE.

RJINDER! I- I WAS
JUST-



WOULD YOU MIND STAYING
A LITTLE LATE AFTER WORK
TONIGHT? I'D LIKE TO
DISCUSS SOME THINGS
WITH YOU.



I SUPPOSE IT'S
TECHNICALLY WORK-
RELATED, BUT ...
CONSIDER IT A SORT OF
'EXTRACURRICULAR
STUDY.'

O-OH!
UM ...



I... I'D LOVE TO,
REALLY, BUT ...
I PROMISED NED
WE'D GET DRINKS
TONIGHT.



I'D MAKE AN
EXCUSE, BUT YKNOW.
WE'RE PRETTY CLOSE
AND WE HAVEN'T
SEEN EACH OTHER
IN A WHILE, SO-

I UNDERSTAND
COMPLETELY.
A PROMISE IS
A PROMISE.



NOT TO WORRY!
PERHAPS ANOTHER
TIME.

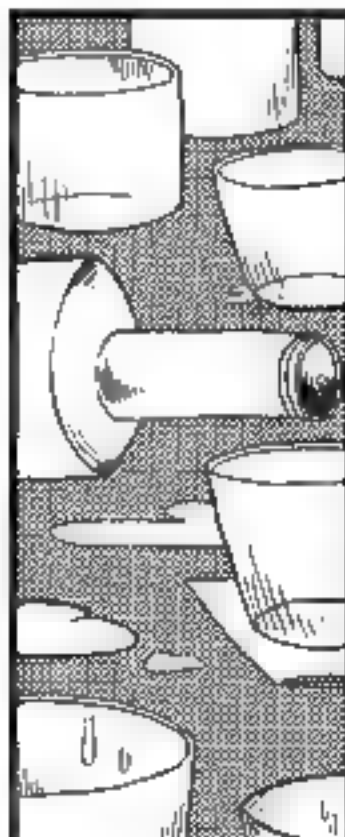


I DIDN'T KNOW WE WERE
GETTING DRINKS AFTER
WORK.

WELL,
WE ARE.







OH MY GOD! NED,
SERIOUSLY. HOW COME
WE NEVER DATED?
WE- WE'RE BOTH
SO COOL.

C'MON LU. IT'S TOO
SOON AFTER THE
DIVORCE. CAN'T GET
MY HEART BROKEN
AGAIN.

HA HA. HONESTLY,
THOUGH. YOU'RE NOT
SEEING ANYONE? I FIND
THAT PRETTY HARD
TO BELIEVE.



I GO OUT ONCE IN A WHILE, YEAH.
MOSTLY THEM INTERNET DATES.

BUT Y'KNOW. I CAN'T
TAKE WILBUR WITH ME,
OUTSIDE OF WORK.

SO...



I GUESS THE
ARM THING PUTS
EM OFF, MORE
THAN I THOUGHT
IT WOULD.

AW, NED.



THEY DON'T KNOW WHAT
THEY'RE MISSING! I ALWAYS
THOUGHT YOU LOOKED LIKE
THE GREAT SANTINI.

WOW, REALLY?



WELL, IT'S GOOD
TO GET BACK TO
WORK. IT'S A NICE
DISTRACTION.

UH, HEH,
YEAH.

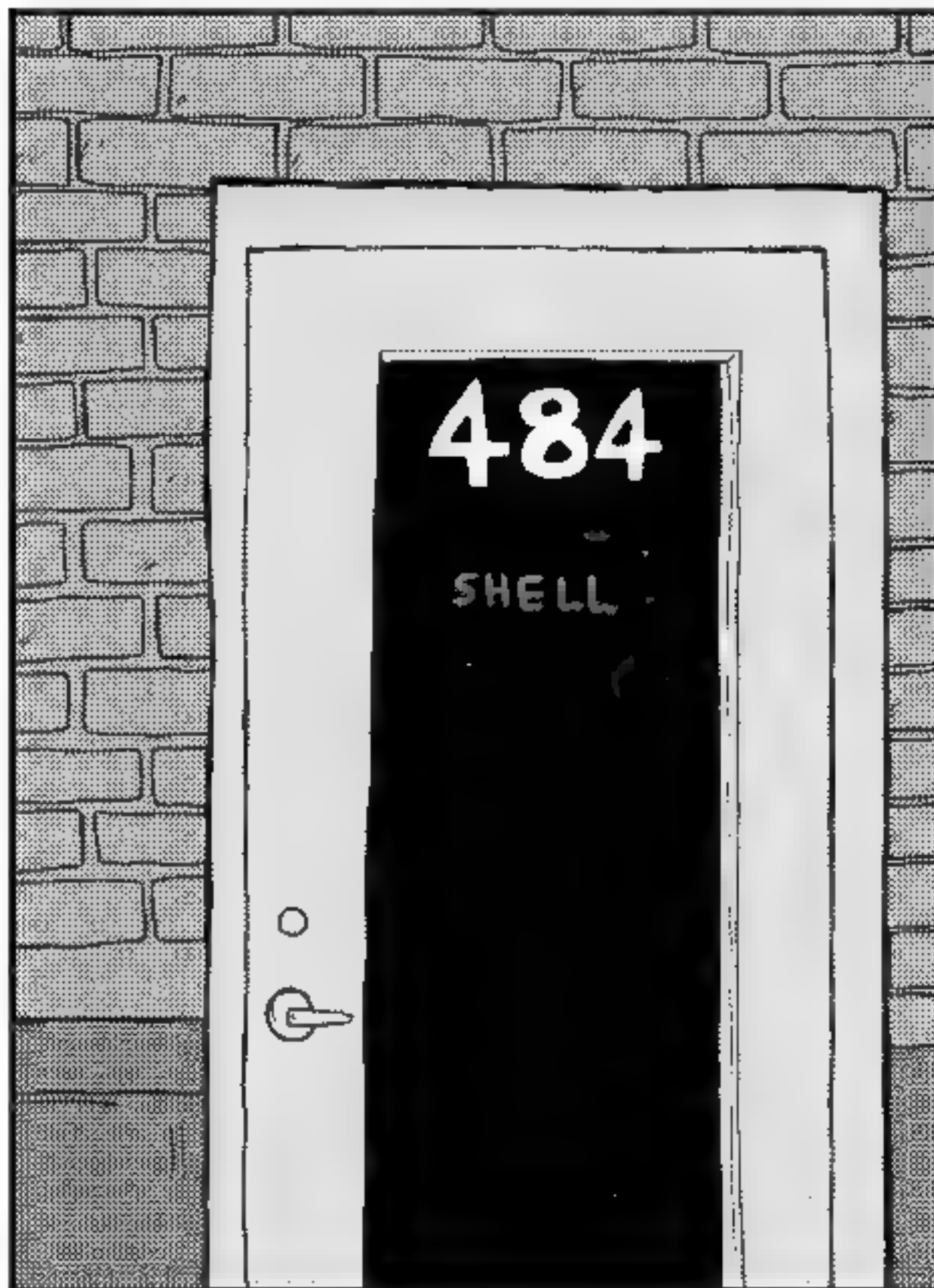


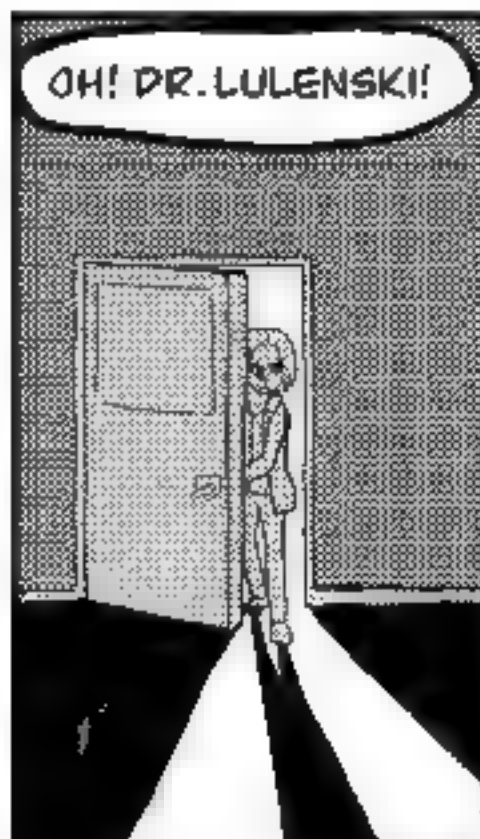
HEY NED?

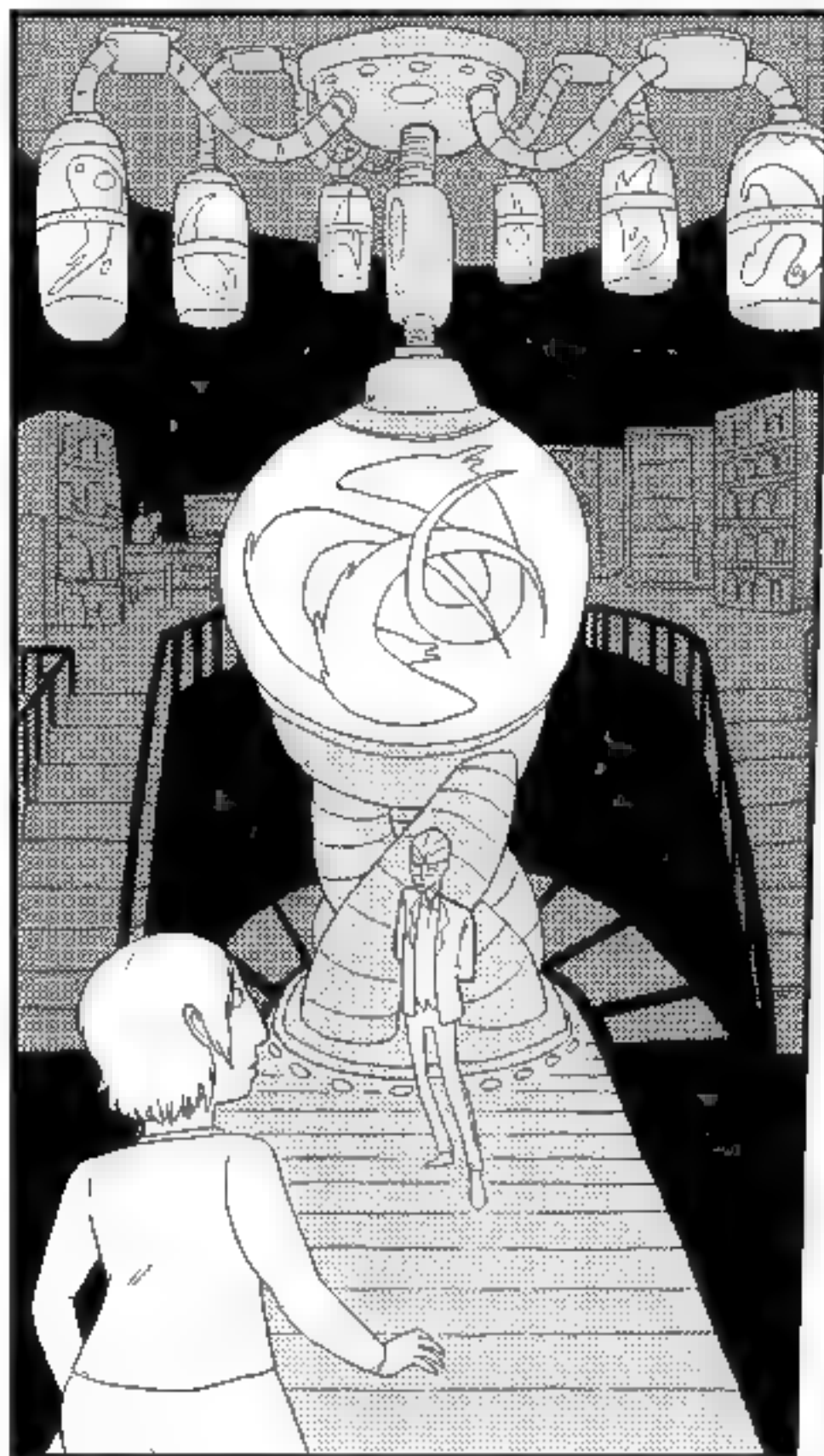
WHEN YOU WERE
A COP... DID
YOU HAVE TO
KILL ANYONE?











THIS IS MY LAB, WHERE I CREATE THE GHOSTS. I KEEP IT QUITE PRIVATE. NOT EVEN DIRECTOR MAUGRAS HAS SEEN IT.



THEN WHY ON EARTH ARE YOU SHOWING IT TO ME?



I FEEL I CAN TRUST YOU. THAT DAY WHEN YOU TOLD ME YOU WOULD NEVER ALLOW YOURSELF TO HOST A MONSTER-



I FELT YOU WERE HONEST THAT DAY IN A WAY THAT NO ONE ELSE WORKING HERE EVER HAS BEEN.

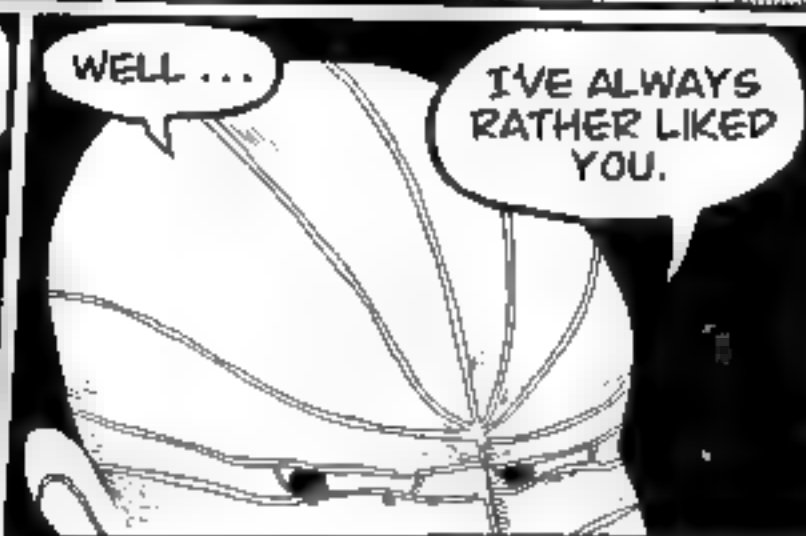


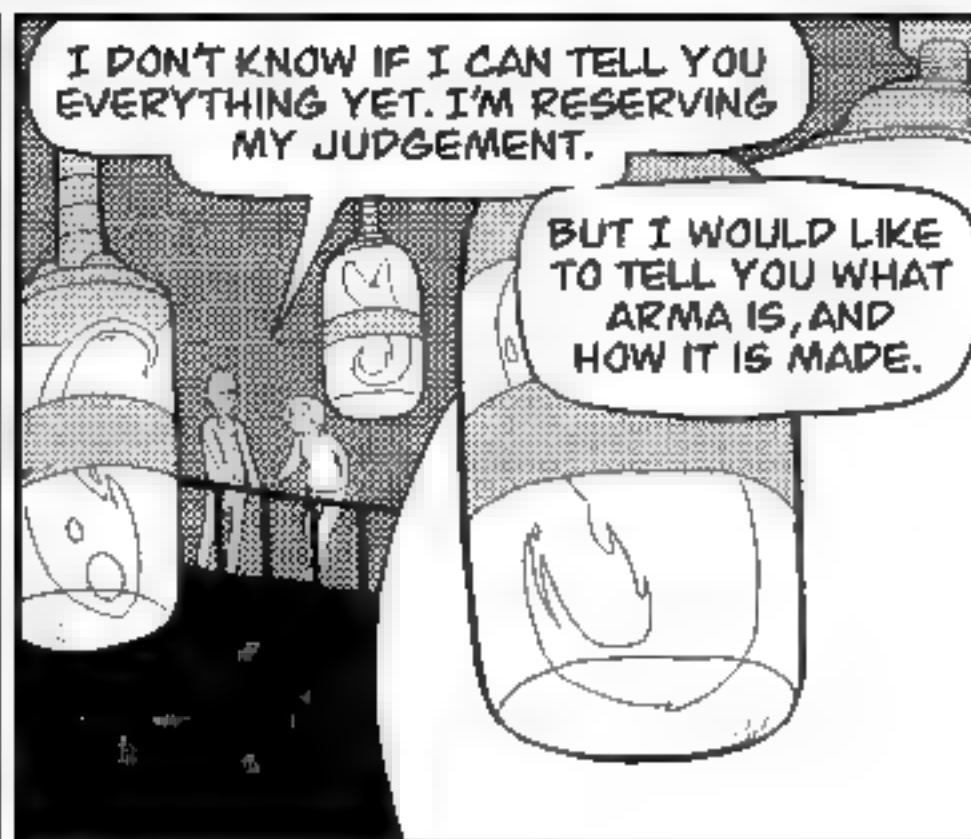
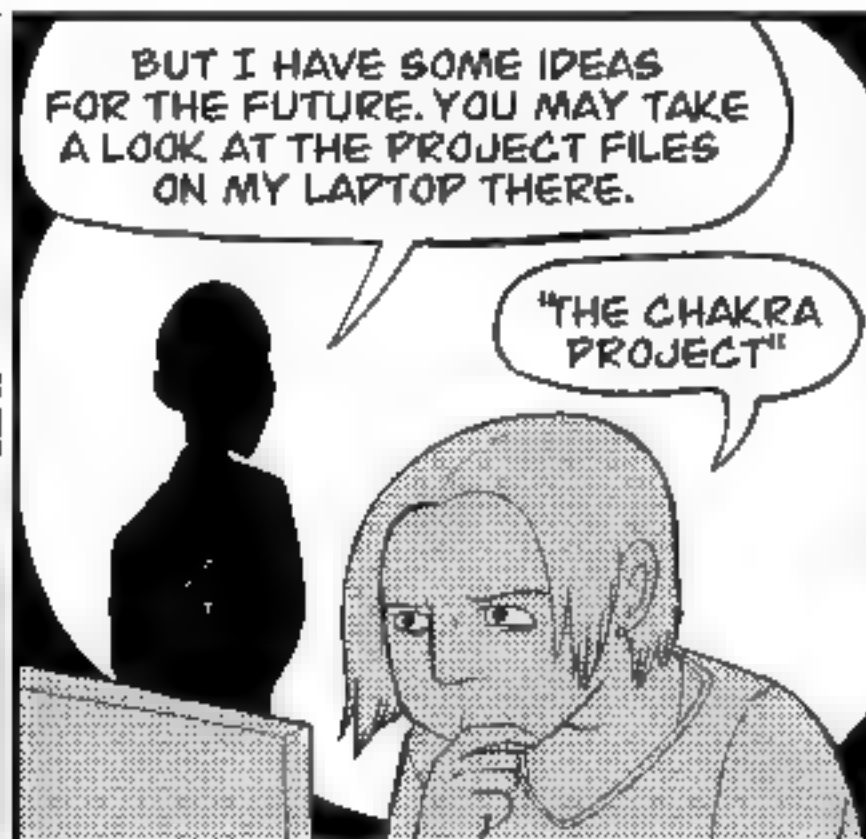
HOW DO YOU KNOW FOR SURE I WAS BEING HONEST?



WELL ...

I'VE ALWAYS RATHER LIKED YOU.





IT IS A CHEMICAL FOUND
IN HUMAN BLOOD. FOR
CENTURIES IT WAS
UNKNOWN AND
UNDETECTABLE, BUT
MAUGRAS AND I
DISCOVERED A WAY
TO FIND AND EXTRACT
IT WHILE WORKING
TOGETHER YEARS AGO.



IT WAS A COMPLETELY
ACCIDENTAL DISCOVERY, BUT WE
RAN EXPERIMENTS AND FOUND
THAT, WITH ENOUGH ARMA
SAMPLES MIXED TOGETHER,
EXPOSED TO RIGHT COCKTAIL OF
CHEMICALS, IT TOOK ON A
GHOSTLY, LIVELY FORM.



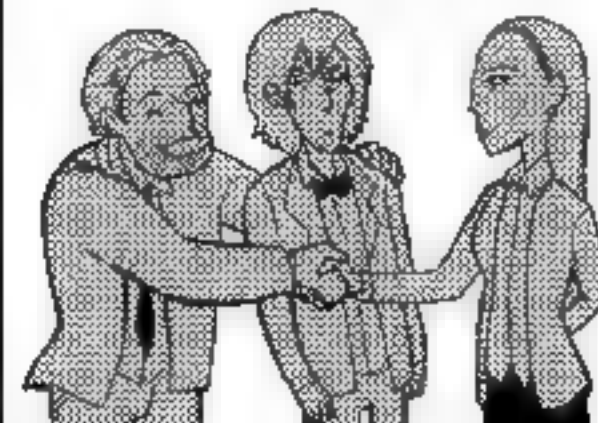
THE FIRST GHOST ATTACKED
MAUGRAS' FOOT. IT TOOK ON
NEW ENERGY AND LIFE AND
BEGAN SPITTING FIERY
PROJECTILES UNTIL WE
PANICKED AND KILLED IT.



WHICH IS WHY
HE WEARS A
WOODEN FOOT
TODAY.

AFTER THAT WE HAD NO
TROUBLE GETTING FUNDING
TO TRY TO TURN THESE
FORMS INTO EFFECTIVE,
CONTROLLABLE
WEAPONS.

AND SHELL
WAS BORN.



HUMAN BLOOD? THAT'S...
NOT WHAT I EXPECTED.

DO WE ALL HAVE IT?
WHAT IS IT? HOW DID YOU FIND IT?

WHAT WERE YOU LOOKING FOR
TO START WITH? SURELY YOU
DIDN'T EXPECT TO DISCOVER
SOME INVISIBLE MAGIC
CHEMICAL...



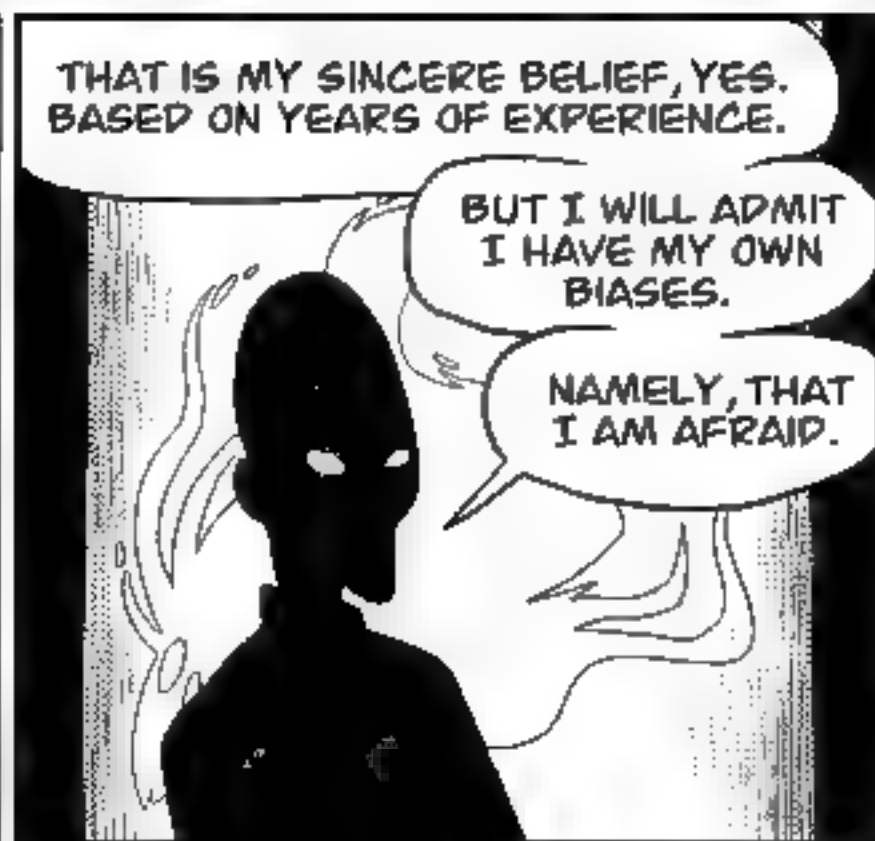
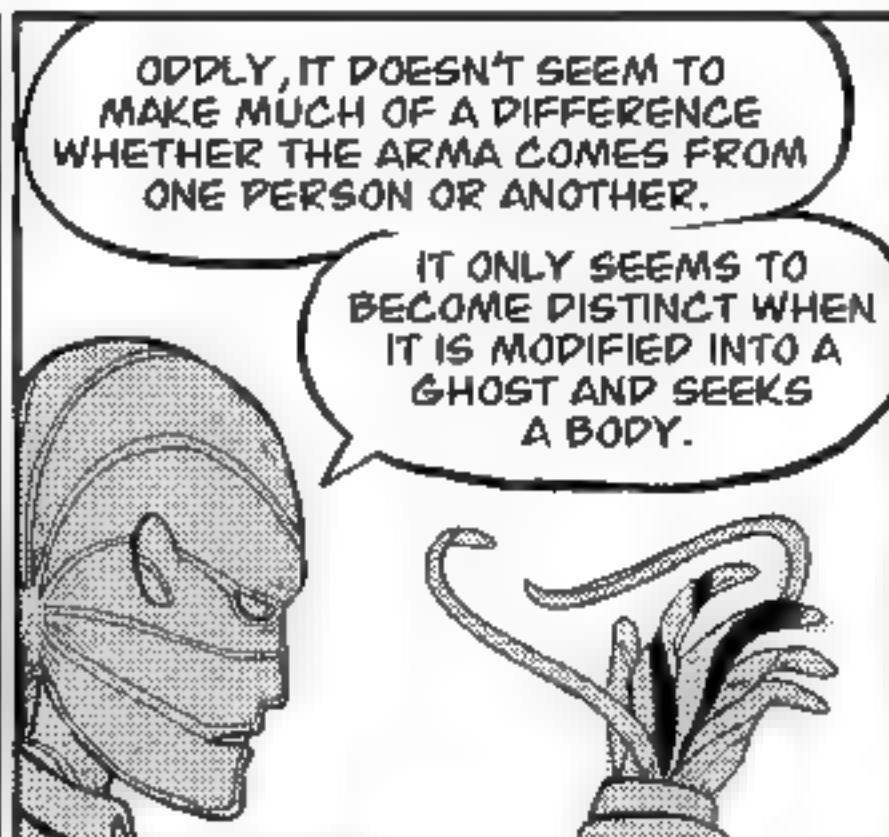
THAT'S SOMETHING I'M NOT
SURE I'D LIKE TO SPEAK WITH
YOU ABOUT, QUITE YET.



PLEASE FORGIVE ME IF I NEED
TO TAKE TIME TO EVALUATE.

OF COURSE, RJINDER. I MEAN...
YOU'RE MY BOSS.





IN TIME I LEARNED HOW TO ENGINEER MONSTERS WHO WERE ENTIRELY PHYSICALLY SEPARATE FROM THEIR HOST.



BUT I WAS THE VERY FIRST TO VOLUNTEER FOR THE PROCEDURE. IT WAS ... IMPERFECT.

I HAD NO IDEA WHAT I MIGHT BECOME. BUT I HADN'T IMAGINED ...

I'D THOUGHT I'D LOSE A HAND OR A FOOT, AND GAIN A CREATURE, A PET.



BUT THAT WASN'T TO BE. AND NOW?

NOW SHE IS WITH ME, ALWAYS. I CANNOT EXIST WITHOUT HER. I AM SWADDLED LIKE A HELPLESS INFANT IN HER EMBRACE, EVERY SECOND OF MY LIFE.



IF MY SKIN HAD A WILL OF HER OWN, SHE MIGHT ONE DAY GROW TIRED OF ME.

FOR HER, KILLING ME WOULD BE SIMPLICITY ITSELF.



OR PERHAPS SHE MIGHT HAVE HER OWN IDEAS OF WHAT SHE WANTED TO DO. SHE COULD TORTURE ME INTO COMPLIANCE SIMPLY BY LIFTING ONE ARM AND EXPOSING ME TO THE AIR.

OH, RUINDER-



BUT SHE DOES NONE OF THOSE THINGS! SHE BEHAVES AS AN EXTENSION OF MYSELF, A MINDLESS TOOL, SAVE PERHAPS TO SEEK OUT NOURISHMENT, AS A WORM MIGHT.



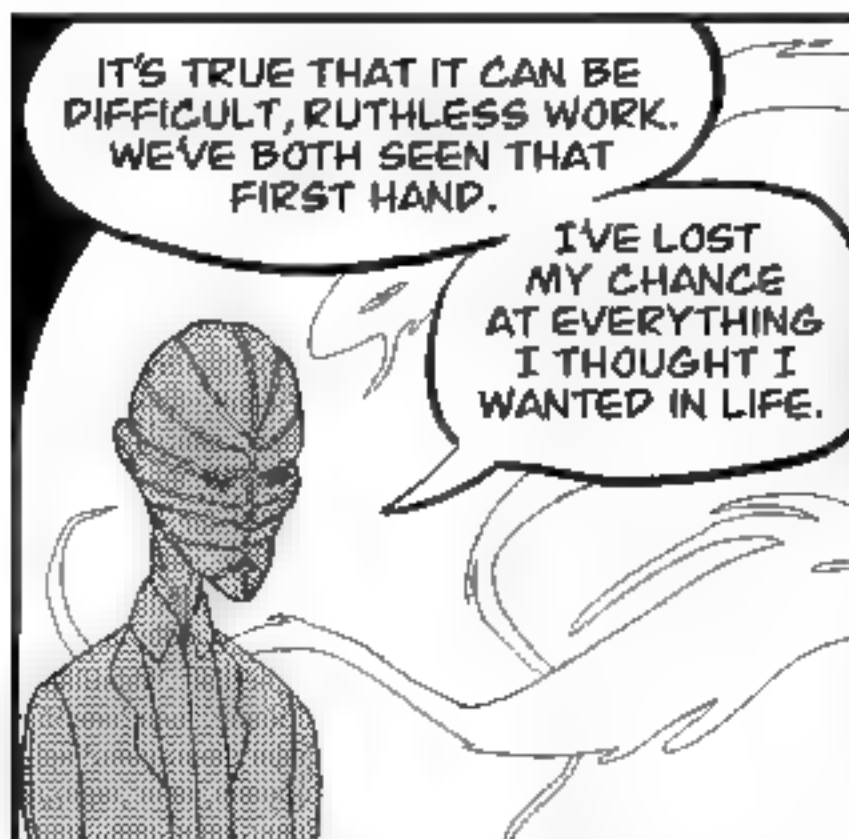
AND SO, I AM VERY GRATEFUL THAT THEY ARE, AS YOU SAY, "JUST" TOOLS. EXACTLY AS WE DESIGNED THEM.



I ... I DON'T KNOW IF I'M CUT OUT FOR THIS KIND OF THING.

I'M NOT SURE IF I WANT TO BE INVOLVED IN SOMETHING SO ... DESTRUCTIVE.





IT'S TRUE THAT IT CAN BE DIFFICULT, RUTHLESS WORK. WE'VE BOTH SEEN THAT FIRST HAND.

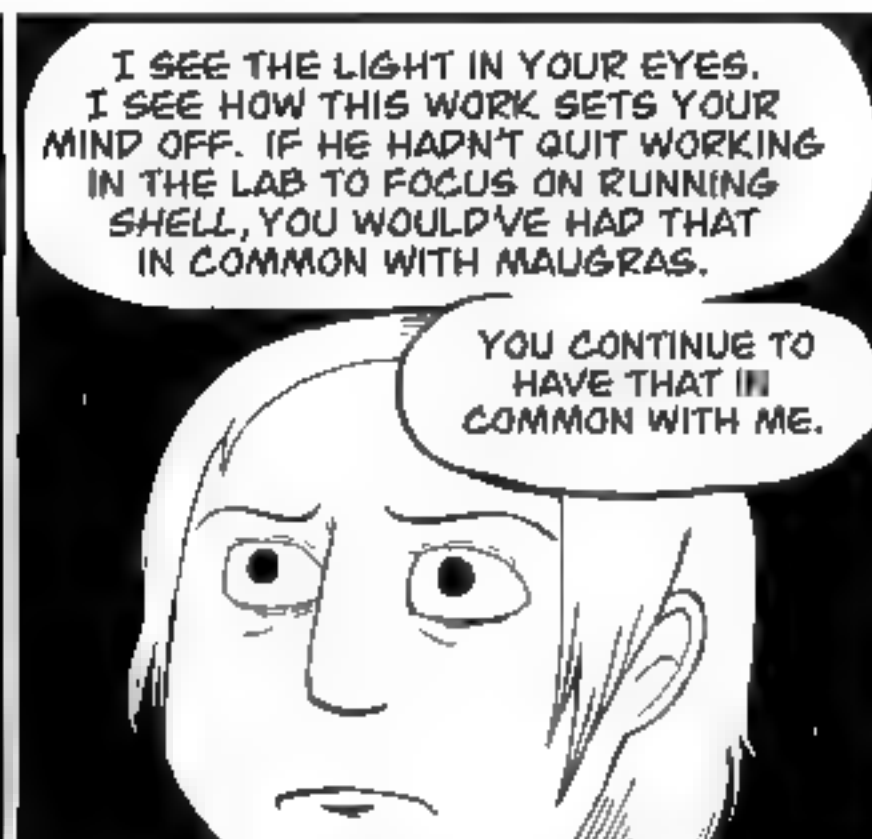
I'VE LOST MY CHANCE AT EVERYTHING I THOUGHT I WANTED IN LIFE.



I WILL NEVER HAVE A WIFE OR A CHILD.

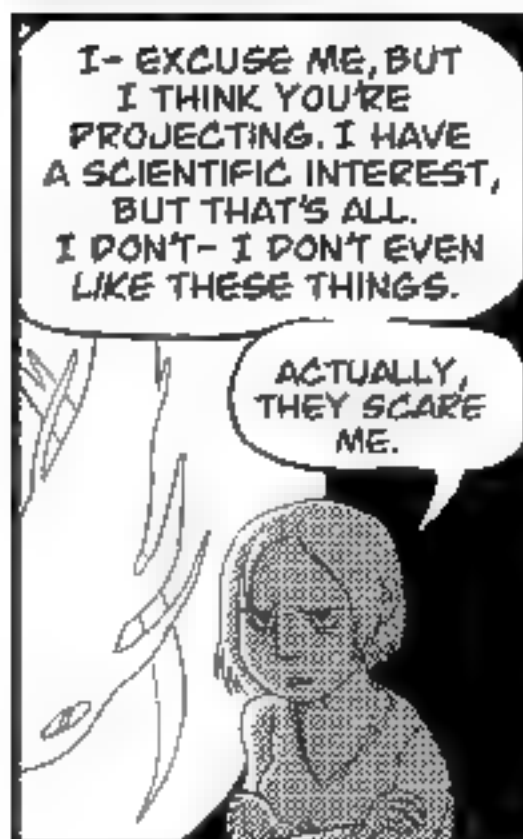
BECAUSE OF MY CONDITION, I HAVE TO HIDE MYSELF, AND PUBLISH MY OWN WORK UNDER DR. MAUGRAS' NAME.

I SET ASIDE THOSE THINGS LONG AGO. BUT ...



I SEE THE LIGHT IN YOUR EYES. I SEE HOW THIS WORK SETS YOUR MIND OFF. IF HE HADN'T QUIT WORKING IN THE LAB TO FOCUS ON RUNNING SHELL, YOU WOULD'VE HAD THAT IN COMMON WITH MAUGRAS.

YOU CONTINUE TO HAVE THAT IN COMMON WITH ME.



I- EXCUSE ME, BUT I THINK YOU'RE PROJECTING. I HAVE A SCIENTIFIC INTEREST, BUT THAT'S ALL. I DON'T- I DON'T EVEN LIKE THESE THINGS.

ACTUALLY, THEY SCARE ME.



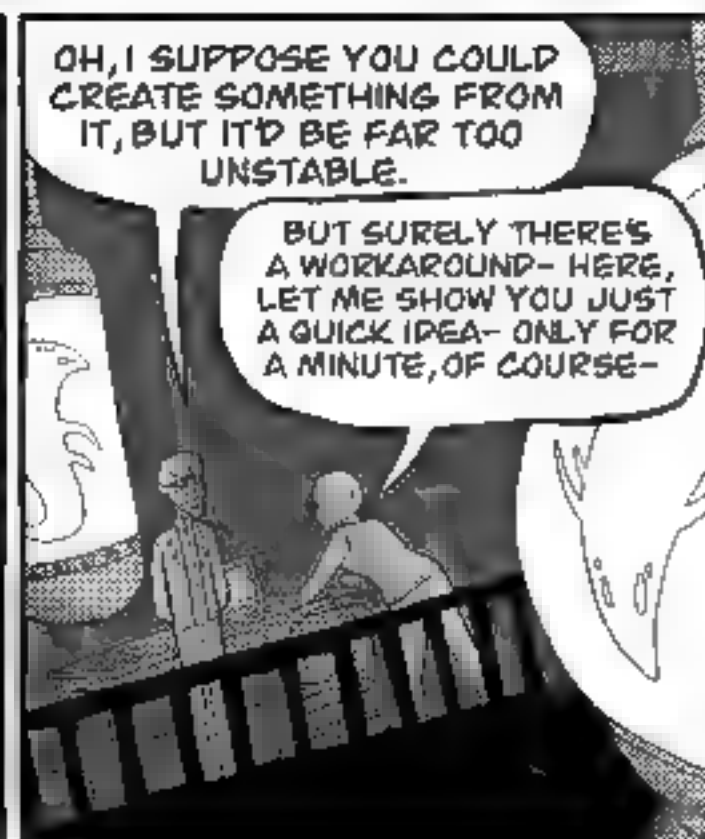
SO WE HAVE THAT IN COMMON, TOO.

...



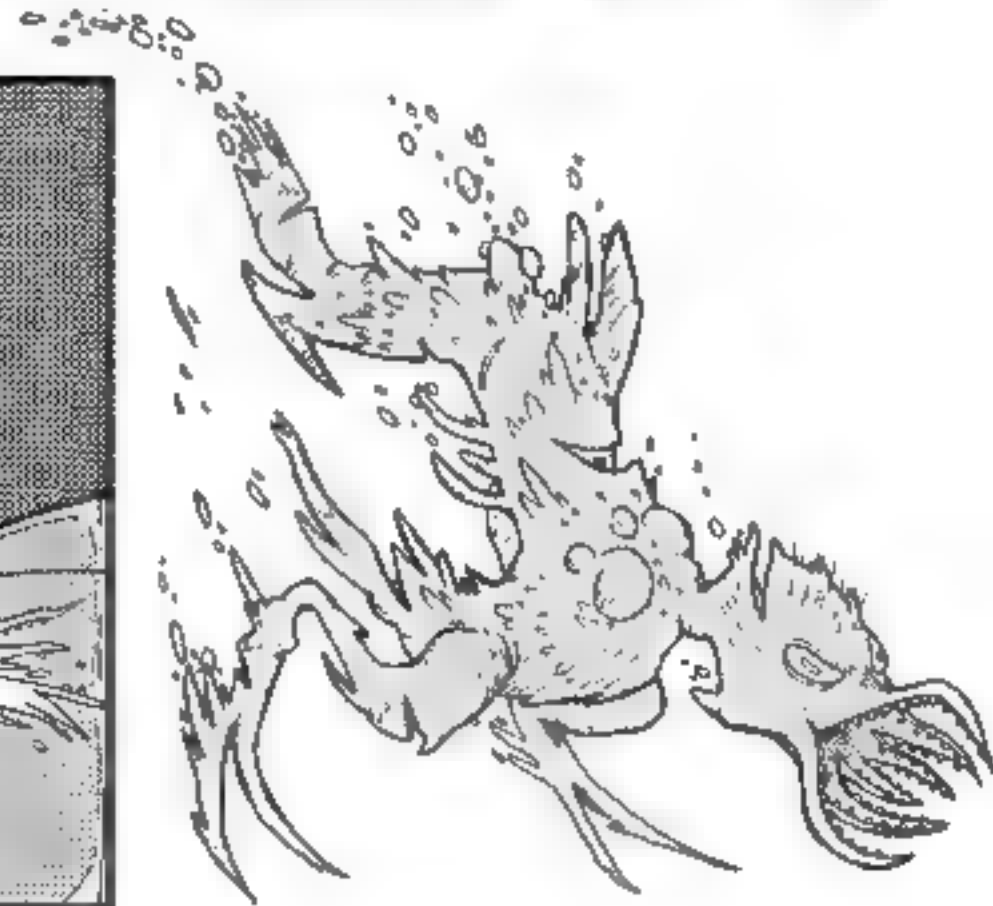
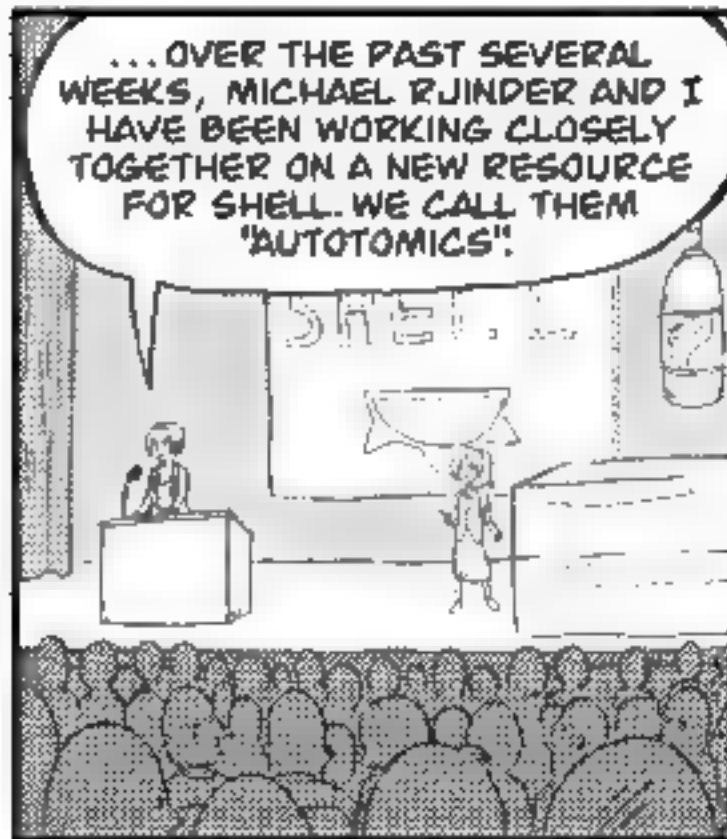
I... I NEED TO THINK ABOUT IT BEFORE I DO ANYTHING.

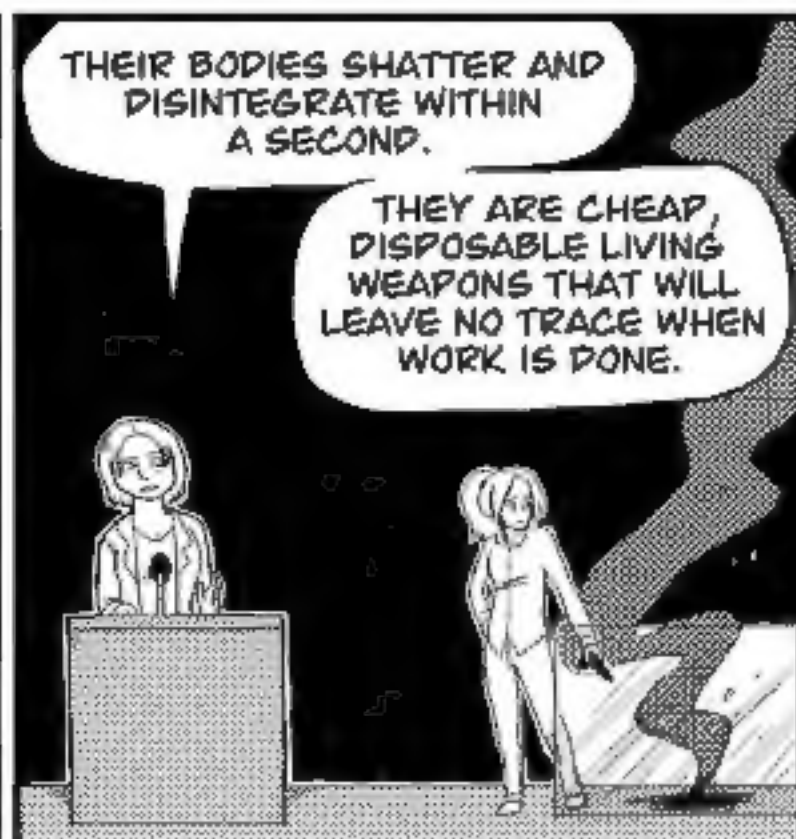
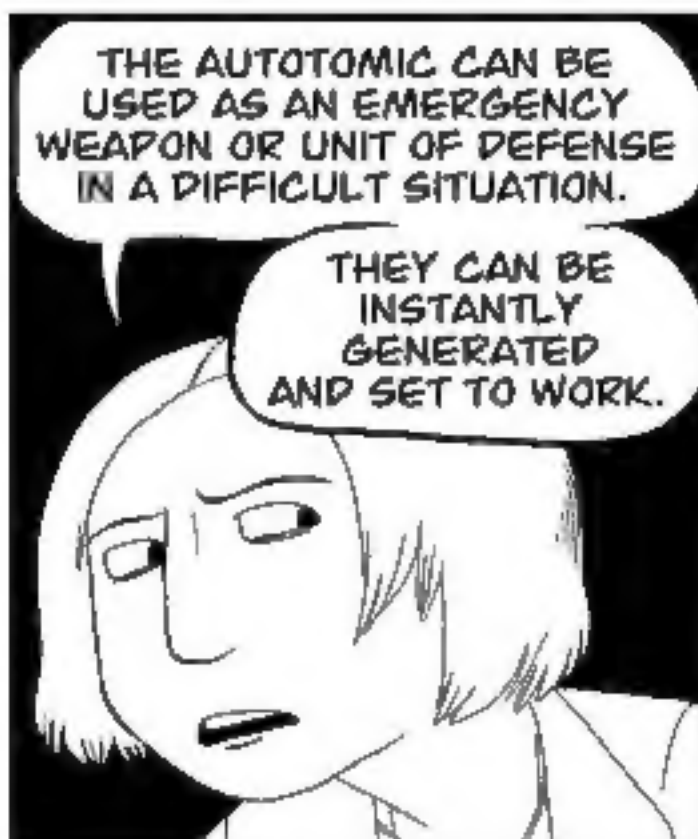
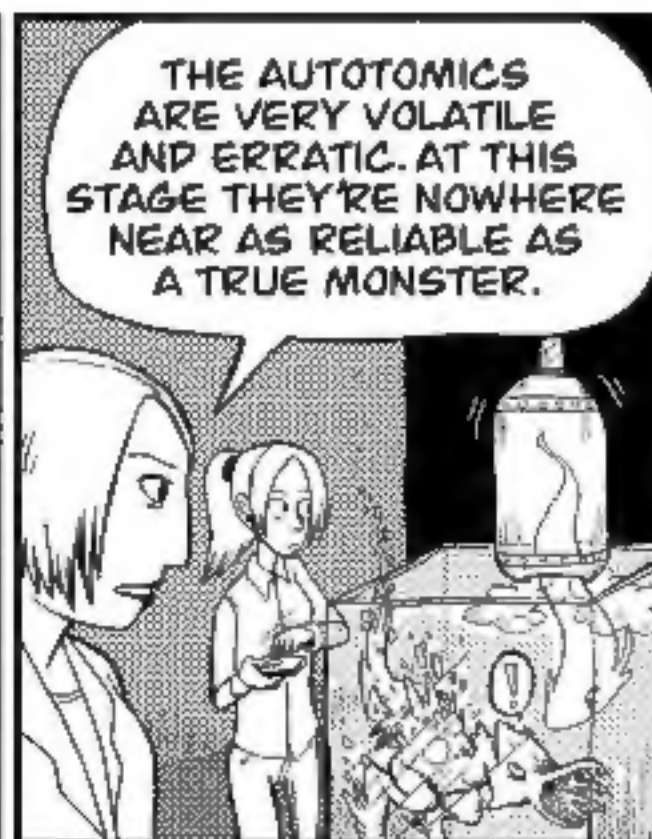
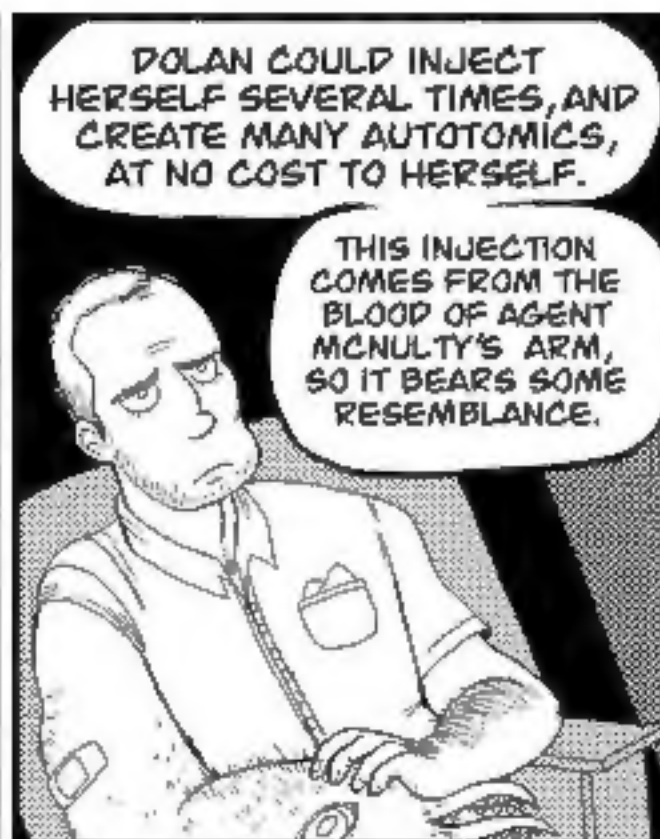
THERE'S SOMETHING YOU SAID THAT GOT KIND OF STUCK IN MY MIND, THOUGH, AND I HAVE TO ASK BEFORE I GO ... WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF YOU EXTRACTED ARMA FROM THE BLOOD OF A MONSTER?

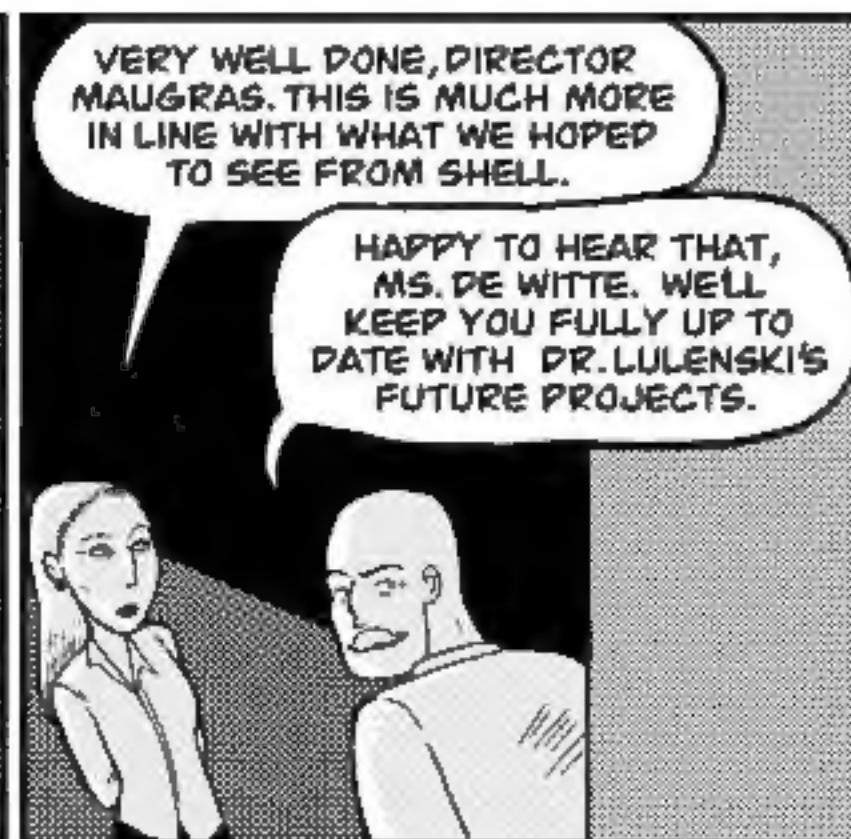


OH, I SUPPOSE YOU COULD CREATE SOMETHING FROM IT, BUT IT'D BE FAR TOO UNSTABLE.

BUT SURELY THERE'S A WORKAROUND- HERE, LET ME SHOW YOU JUST A QUICK IDEA- ONLY FOR A MINUTE, OF COURSE-









CHAPTER 10 THE AUTOTOMICS

